

Sermon Passion Sunday 2004...

And so we come today to the holiest part of the year: the Way of the Cross. We are called to follow him and to look upon him.

Is it nothing to you, all ye that pass by? Behold, and see if there is any sorrow like unto my sorrow.

David Martin says: "Churchgoers would feel at ease with a Creed that goes like this: *I believe in God, who is love. In Jesus Christ who taught us about that love. In the Holy Spirit who keeps us in that love. And in the church, the community of Christians, who share this love with one another.*

"That would indeed be a religion for all sensible people," David says. "How odd and strange then that the real Creed ignores it and says instead: *who for us men and for our salvation came down from heaven and was crucified also for us under Pontius Pilate*"

The main thing Jesus did was to suffer and be killed. This suffering and death of Jesus was foretold from all time and, if you will only read the Bible, you will be stirred, moved and shaken by the terrible and beautiful prophecies of what was always going to happen to him. Look at the beginning of the Bible. In the Garden east of Eden, they eat of the Tree of Knowledge and inherit death. In the gospels we see the Tree of Life, the Cross of Christ, and we inherit life. 1800 years before Christ was born Abraham strides out one morning to sacrifice Isaac, his son:

And Abraham built an altar there, and laid the wood in order, and bound Isaac his son, and laid him on the altar upon the wood.

Yes, then what 1800 years later? They laid the wood in order again in the shape of the Cross. And they laid Jesus on the Cross. And that Cross too was an altar: the altar by which, through the sacrifice of Christ's Blood, we receive forgiveness of our sins and life everlasting. Remember how God intervened and spared Isaac, saying to Abraham all those hundreds of years before Christ:

Lay not thy hand upon the lad. For now I know that thou fearest God, seeing thou hast not withheld thy son, thy only son from me.

And 1800 years later it is God who does not spare his only Son, even when his Son cries out from the Cross: *My God, My God, why hast thou forsaken me?*

Then look at Psalm 22, written 900 years before the birth of Christ:

They pierced my hands and my feet: I may tell all my bones: they stand staring and looking upon me.

That is what happens to Jesus 900 years later. And we begin to see a pattern and a purpose in these strangely corresponding stories.

Read if you will, if you can bring yourself to read it, Isaiah, chapter 53:

We hid as it were our faces from him... but he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him: and with his stripes we are healed.

None of these terrible sufferings which came upon Our Lord came upon him without his express permission. He knows what his destiny and purpose is and he arranges it himself. It is Jesus who tells the disciples he is going to Jerusalem to die. It is Jesus who arranges the Last Supper and inaugurates the Sacrament of his Body and Blood. It is Jesus who tells them to put away the sword and who submits to his enemies in the Garden of Gethsemane. It is Jesus who stands making no excuses before Caiaphas and Pilate. It is Jesus who takes up the Cross of his own will. And he asks us to do these two things: to follow and to watch. His first disciples, we remember, do neither: they fall asleep, then they run away.

But here he submits himself, offers himself, sacrifices himself. He does it as a king. The Royal banners forward go. In the Garden of Gethsemane. Says David Martin again: *The Royal Banners now quietly assemble around this kingly servant and priestly victim.*

Are you able to watch him and follow him? What do you reply when Scripture asks you *Who is this who comes from Edom with red garments from Bozra?*

Are you able to watch? When it comes to horror and heartbreak, there is hardly need for Mel Gibson. Listen to Lancelot Andrewes back in the 17th century:

They did not whip him, they ploughed his back and made not stripes but long furrows upon it. They did not put on his wreath of thorns and press it down with their hands, but beat it on with staves to make it enter through skin, flesh, skull and all. They did not on Golgotha pierce his hands and feet, but made wide holes like that of a spade, as if they had been digging in some ditch

Are you able to watch that? *And they looked upon him, they also which pierced him.* Can we look upon him knowing that...

It is the sin of our polluted hands which pierced his hands; it is the swiftness of our feet to do evil which pierced his feet; it is the wicked devices of our heads that gored his head; and it is the wretched desires of our hearts that pierced his heart also.

Are you still following? Are you still watching? There is worse to come. He is scourged and crowned with the thorns. He is pierced by the nails. And the spear is thrust into his side. But worse than all these things for him, he is pierced by his love for us and he cries out: *Father forgive them, for they know not what they do.*

There were also women looking on afar off: among who was Mary Magdalene, and Mary the mother of James the less and of Joses, and Salome.

And we look on with them. And we pray: *O Lord, as he was then, that we might never be; as he is now that we might be forever.*

We feel guilty because we cannot follow and we cannot watch. But do not make things worse by feeling guilty about your guilt. We feel anxious and afraid. Do not feel guilty about your anxieties, your disquiet: they are not sins but afflictions brought on you by the crafts and assaults of the devil. Of Our Lord who hangs now on the Cross, making to bloom the Tree of Life for us, Charles Sisson wrote:

*What is astonishing is that he came here at all:
Where no one ever came voluntarily before*

If you are afraid to follow and to look on this sight, on the Passion of the Christ, take comfort from these words of John Donne who also felt obliged to turn away. This is how that poet speaks to Jesus:

*O Saviour, as thou hangst upon the Tree;
I turn my back to thee but to receive
Corrections till thy mercy bid thee leave.
O think me worth thine anger, punish me,
Burn off my rusts and my deformity;
Restore thine image, so much, by thy grace,
That thou mayst know me –
Then I'll turn my face.*

O Holy Jesus, most merciful Redeemer, Friend and Brother: may we see thee more clearly, love thee more dearly and follow thee more nearly day by day. Amen.